

**Testimony of David Harms, CCA, CPAg**  
**Presented on behalf of the Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) Program and the American Society of Agronomy (ASA) to the House Ag Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research**  
**June 15, 2004**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Technical Service Provider program. My name is David Harms. I am President of Crop Pro-Tech, Inc. an agricultural consulting firm based in Bloomington, Illinois. I started Crop Pro-Tech over 27 years ago. Today, we provide consulting services in Illinois, Indiana and Iowa covering about 100,000 acres. We have 10 permanent and 19 part-time staff. I am a Certified Crop Adviser and Certified Professional Agronomist. I am also a registered Technical Service Provider with USDA-NRCS.

Today, Mr. Chairman, I am here speaking with you on behalf of the American Society of Agronomy's Certified Crop Adviser Program. There are approximately 14,000 CCAs throughout the United States and Canada with about 12,500 of them residing in the United States. CCA is the largest agriculturally oriented certification program in the United States with over 400 volunteers serving in some capacity to provide leadership and guidance for the program's activities. These volunteers represent academia, government and industry. This diversity helps provide the program's strengths and aids in setting its standards.

Each CCA must pass two comprehensive exams covering nutrient management, soil and water management, integrated pest management and crop management. They must detail their experiences and educational background and provide supporting references. A CCA must sign and adhere to the CCA Code of Ethics and earn 40 hours of continuing education every two years to remain certified.

CCAs have a Memorandum of Understanding with the USDA-NRCS recognizing them as Technical Service Providers in nutrient management, pest management and tillage practices. CCA was the first to have such an agreement under the 1996 Farm Bill as a Third Party Vendor and more recently under the 2002 Farm Bill as a Technical Service Provider.

That brings me to why we are here today. To discuss how the Technical Service Provider program is functioning. We have included comments from CCAs from across the country in our written testimony. When asked how they would rate their satisfaction with the overall TSP program, 40% were satisfied and 60% were unsatisfied. In general there has been a lack of information leading to misunderstandings that resulted in frustration by those who were trying to register as TSPs. The biggest challenge for those that are TSPs is getting paid for work completed. This too has added to the frustration, little to no funding for technical assistance or promised payments that have not yet materialized.

Overall funding is only part of the problem, how it is distributed is a bigger challenge for the private sector TSP. As a representative of the private sector, agronomic TSP community, very little to any funding has reached this segment. To use USDA's numbers from 2003, of the approximately \$23 million that was allocated for technical assistance through TSPs, about \$1 million reached private sector (for-profit) TSPs. That is less than 5% of the \$23 million with the

balance going to traditional NRCS organizational relationships. Much of this was credited to the short time frame between when funding was allocated and actually released forcing USDA-NRCS to use existing relationships not allowing time to develop additional ones. We are told that the request for technical assistance by the department is \$40 million with a minimum of \$30 million for 2004 but this has yet to be released.

This increased funding will help but let me go back to my earlier comment. The challenge for the private sector TSP is how the funding is distributed. The Not To Exceed rates were released with very little explanation causing much confusion on how they actually worked. Many CCAs thought that USDA was setting the price someone could charge a customer for a specific service. This was not the case but the resulting misunderstanding compounded by the complexity of the process discouraged those in the private sector from being involved. The process needs to be simplified and clearly explained. We commend USDA on recent attempts to do that and to update the Not To Exceed rates later this summer. We also understand the USDA's desire to contain costs and set parameters but they need to be as realistic as possible. The current rates are viewed as unrealistic in many locations. We would strongly recommend that USDA use both private and public sector entities' examples when setting these rates.

The distribution of technical assistance funds in cooperative and contribution agreements is not available to for-profit, private sector entities. How can a private sector entity compete with a public sector entity or not-for-profit entity that is able to develop cooperative or contribution agreements with USDA? It can't.

Congress' intent, in our opinion, was to provide additional and alternative resources of technical assistance for landowners to meet environmental demands in a timely manner through the TSP program. It still has that potential but it has not been realized and it will not be due to the current level of frustration and how funding is distributed to private sector entities. One suggestion for improving the distribution of funds would be to designate a percentage of the overall technical assistance funds to cropping systems and clearly state what segment of the cropping system technical assistance is for private sector TSPs and public sector TSPs. This would help clear up misunderstandings and motivate the private sector to participate if that is what is truly wanted.

At this point in time, the TSP program has not measured up to its potential. There is a high level of frustration as documented in our CCA TSP survey. The private, agronomic consulting TSP sector is losing much of its earlier interest and desire to be part of the TSP program. Some say this was the intent and that is why there are so many obstacles and a general lack of information. There are many examples where positive working relationships have been established between NRCS, conservation district staff and CCAs from the private sector. CCAs would like to continue to build on these positive relationships and work to improve the TSP program but we can't do that alone. It will be very difficult to make progress in this area if the process is not streamlined and the funding distribution challenge improved.

Thank you again for allowing the American Society of Agronomy's Certified Crop Advisers to have time on your agenda and to share our experiences with the TSP program. We look forward to working with you to make this the program Congress intended it to be.